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SUBJECT: KURDISTAN PRESIDENT BARZANI DISCUSSES PESHMERGA,
REGIONAL ADMINISTRATION AND MEDIA FREEDOM

(U) Classified by RRT Coordinator James Yellin, reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. This message is from the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional
Reconstruction Team (RRT).

¶2. (C) Summary: Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)
President Massoud Barzani told Kurdistan Regional Coordinator
on December 29 that peshmerga security forces, currently
controlled respectively by the KDP and PUK, would be a
unified apolitical force under central KRG authority by March
or April 2007. He added that a new structure is being put in
place that will &restrict the independent authority⁸ of the
political parties. The Regional Coordinator emphasized the
importance of free media and called on Barzani to publicly
show his support for media freedom. Barzani agreed and
encouraged the Regional Coordinator to bring any media
freedom issues to his attention. Barzani's timeline for
integration of the peshmerga may be overly optimistic and
effective restrictions on the KDP and PUK are unlikely.
Although Barzani expressed his support for media freedom,
junior KRG and party officials continue to intimidate
journalists. End Summary.

Integrating the Peshmerga

¶3. (C) Regional Coordinator and RRT Officers met with KRG
President Barzani on December 29 at his palace in Salah
ad-Din. In addition to raising political issues reported
septel, Regional Coordinator asked Barzani when peshmerga
forces, currently under separate control by the KDP and PUK
in their respective territorial strongholds, would be unified
under central KRG administration in Erbil, answerable to
President Barzani.

¶4. (C) Barzani responded that he is working on this issue
directly, and that the political decision to unify the
peshmerga forces had been made, and there is an agreement on
the structure of the new unified force. Several &technical
issues⁸ remain to be worked out, but he expects to announce
a finalized agreement by the end of March or April 2007.
(Note: The KRG is also working with GOI authorities to
transform the peshmerga into a force in accordance with
Iraq's Constitution. End Note.).

Integrating KRG Provinces

¶5. (C) Remarking on the broader political integration and
administrative centralization taking place in the KRG,
Barzani said that the role of the political parties in the
unified KRG administration is changing. He added that a new
structure is being put in place that will &restrict the
independent authority⁸ of the parties.

¶6. (C) Note: Before 2006, the KRG was administered by the PUK in Sulaimaniyah governate and parts of Erbil governates, and by the KDP in Erbil and Dohuk governates. The two parties agreed to merge many administrative functions into a centralized KRG authority in January 2006. End Note.

Pressing for Media Freedom

¶7. (C) Regional Coordinator stressed the importance of media freedom and called on Barzani to show public support for it. Barzani agreed and encouraged the Regional Coordinator to bring any problems to his attention.

¶8. (C) Comment: The timeline Barzani outlined for integration of the Peshmerga forces may be optimistic; the March/April date is a delay from the December 2006 date previously envisioned. The &technical issues8 he cites may reflect a reluctance of the KDP and PUK to give up control of their security forces. More KRG ministries may be unified, but effective restrictions on the KDP and PUK are unlikely. The KDP and PUK still retain their own ministries of Peshmerga, Interior, Justice, and Finance, and continue to operate separate police forces, courts and prisons. Likewise, most KRG media outlets are funded and run by the political parties. There are a few independent newspapers and radio stations, but their journalists are subject to extrajudicial intimidation by junior or mid-level party officials. The result is that criticism of the highest level government and party officials remains off-limits to the media. Public support for media freedom from senior KRG officials would keep freelance intimidation from junior officials in check. End Comment.

KHALILZAD